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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes a general principle of topic resources as a key principle of conversation. The first section of the paper offers a discussion of the notion of cohesion as a condition in which interactants perceive that their utterances are related to one another and presents the "given-new" strategy (in which the interactants indicate what elements in an utterance are built upon prior discourse and which are without such antecedents). It then suggests this strategy as a perspective from which to analyze the sources of cohesion between utterances and to monitor changes in conversational topics. The second section details the distinction between the elements in an utterance that have the status of "given" and those that have the status of "new." The third section draws upon the "given-new" distinction to identify specific procedures for establishing the cohesion of utterances within conversations and to formulate the topic resources principle. The fourth section contains a discussion of the main implications of this principle. (FL)

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# COHESION AND CHANGE IN CONVERSATIONAL TOPICS

William Boyd

0.0 Introduction The purpose of this paper is to propose a general principle of topic resources as a key principle of conversation. Section 1.0 discusses the notion of cohesion as a condition in which interactants perceive that their utterances are related to one another. The given-new strategy is presented as a useful perspective from which to analyze the sources of cohesion between utterances, and monitor changes in conversational topics. Section 2.0 details the distinction between the elements in an utterance which have the status of given and those which have the status of new. In section 3.0 the given-new distinction is capitalized upon to identify specific procedures for establishing the cohesion of utterances within conversations and to formulate the topic resources principle. The main implications of this principle are discussed in section 4.0.

1.0 Cohesion in Conversation It is apparent that utterances can be perceived (by interactants as well as investigators) as either related or unrelated to one another. A condition of relatedness, or what discourse analysts refer to as cohesion, occurs when the interpretation of one utterance can be seen as dependent upon a previous utterance.[1] That is, a current utterance cannot be perceived as relevant to the conversation without some reference to a previous utterance.[2] The assessment of a set of utterances as making up a conversation, rather than being simply a set of unrelated utterances, is in large part a function of cohesion.[3] In fact, as Vuchinich points out, "Cohesion is a fundamental taken for granted property produced in ordinary conversation. When a cohesive turn is presented

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in conversation it is rarely marked in a special way. It is assumed and necessary for stable, on-going interaction that successive turns cohere."[4] Conversely, it is the lack of cohesion that is, quite literally, remarkable.[5]

1.1 Clark and Haviland have formulated this tendancy toward cohesion in interaction as a given-new contract among interactants. This contract calls for the interactants to indicate which elements in an utterance are built upon prior discourse (previous utterances in a conversation)--the <u>given</u> elements. The contract also calls for interactants to indicate which elements are without such an antecedent--the <u>new</u> elements. In the fulfillment of the given-new contract, Clark and Haviland suggest that the speaker agrees to "convey information he thinks the listener already knows as given information, and to convey information he thinks the listener doesn't yet know as new information. The listener, for his part, agrees to interpret all utterances in the same light."[6] Haliday and Hasan have defined the given-new distinction in a similar light with emphasis on the relationship of the elements in an utterance to elements in previous utterances. Their assertion is that the status of <u>new</u> information does not mean that the information has not been perviously introduced (although this is usually the case) but rather that the speaker presents the <u>new</u> information as not being recoverable from previous discourse. In other words, the speaker presents the <u>new</u> information as "without antecedent," whether or not the notion has been previously introduced. They further suggest that the <u>given</u> element is presented as recoverable from either preceding discourse, the situation (physical surroundings, etc.) or from what is assumed to be "known in common" among the interactants.[7]

1.2 According to Clark and Haviland's given-new contract, the speaker can be expected to somehow mark the given elements and the new elements, while the listener can be expected to search his/her memory, and surroundings for the unique antecedent of the given information and to relate the new information to that antecedent. In other words, the listener can be expected to recognize that a relationship exists between the current utterance and the prevailing topic of previous utterances, see the given element (as marked in the current utterance) as a part of the prevailing topic, and relate the new information in the current utterance to that part of the prevailing topic (as defined by the given elements). An argument can be made that an utterance about the physical surroundings may exhibit no relation to the prevailing topic of previous utterances. However, as explained below, interactants allow utterances about the situation to function as cohesive utterances in conversation.[8] As an analytical tool, the given-new contract is compatible with Sacks' formulation of the Membership Categorization Device (MCD). According to Sacks, the MCD requires that if two utterances can be seen as related then interactants ought to see them that way. This concept of the MCD suggests that interactants "look for" a relationship between prior and current utterances.[9] The given-new terminology will be maintained for this analysis because of the more micro analysis it allows.

1.3 Two major points in the given-new orientation toward analyzing conversation warrant further discussion. First, speakers are expected to mark given and new information and to formulate their utterances so that the listener is provided with sufficient resources to compute both the part of the topic being highlighted by the given element, and the new comment on

that topic. Second, once established as given, the information becomes a potential resource upon which interactants can draw for subsequent utterances, and a point of coorientation for the interactants.

2.0 The Given-New Distinction Clark and Haviland state that the given-new distinction is established in utterances through a three-step strategy in which : 1) the listener isolates the given and new information in the current utterance, 2) searches his/her memory, the prior discourse, and the situation for a direct antecedent of the given information, and 3) integrates the new information into the structure of the given information.[10] From a speakers point of view, cohesion in conversation is produced by providing the listener with sufficient resources to perform the three steps in the given new strategy. Furthermore, as Clark and Haviland point out, the speaker's attempts to provide the listener with sufficient resources requires that the elements of information in the utterance be marked as given or new.[11]

2.1 The marking of given and new information was formulated by Clark and Haviland as basically a stylistic concern. Several other investigations have pointed out individual tactics for marking the elements. These tactics include: pro-term insertion, category collection, stress, temporal order, and utterance construction.[12]

One example of a tactic for marking information as given can be found in Nofsinger and Boyd's discussion of pro-term insertion. They have stated that an interactant can formulate cohesion-producing utterances by substituting pro-terms (pronouns, such as: we, you, who, that, etc.; and pro-verbs, such as: be, do, will, etc.) for elements in prior utterances.[13]

The use of a pro-term requires that a unique antecedent be recoverable from prior discourse or from the situation in order for the term to make sense.[14] In the following sample of conversation, consider the use of the proterms he (in the form of "he'll") and that (in the form of "that's") in utterance 2.

Example 1

1. A: Do you know that Bob is moving to Albany?

2. B: That's great. I think he'll really like it there.

The insertion of the pro-terms that and he in utterance 2 marks the information substituted for (in this case, Bob's moving to Albany, and Bob) as given since the interpretation of the pro-terms is based on the assumption that the information substituted for can be recovered from a prior utterance.

2.2 When an interactant is unsure about the givenness of a topic, he/she may check the status. For example, if a speaker is unsure about the boundries of the "known in common" knowledge, Sacks and Schegloff have suggested that he/she often checks the given status of a topic with "try-markers."[15] A try-marker consists of an utterance about the proposed topic followed by a pause. The absence of a listener's recognition signal (e.g., a head nod, "uh huh," etc.) during the pause is considered as a signal of non-recognition, which in turn requires some conversational repair procedure to establish the topic as given. These repair procedures may come in the form of added information or a reformulation of the utterance. Note the following use of a try-marker.

Example 2

1. A: You know Steve? (pause)
2. B: (absence of a recognition signal)
3. A: That short guy with the dark hair? (pause)
4. B: (absence of a recognition signal)
5. A: Well, he's this guy in my speech class,
6. B: uh huh

In utterance 1, A can be seen as using a try-marker to test the status of the information "Steve," and can be seen to supplement that information in utterance 3. Both utterance 1 and utterance 3 can be seen as relying on information assumed to be known in common. In utterance 5, A can be seen as reformulating the topic ( the given), and the reformulation can be seen as relying on a more general antecedent (this guy) and the information "Steve" is incorporated into the notion "this guy." Try markers, then, aid in determining that which is known in common information for the interactants.

2.3 Once a subject is established as given, it then becomes a resource upon which the interactants can draw in future utterances. In one study of category collection as a cohesion-producing procedure, an example of the use of given information as a resource in conversation was provided. It was pointed out that interactants recognize certain elements as being related to certain other elements. For example, the element "sister" can be seen to be related to the element "brother" through a collection of these types of elements under the possible heading of "family members."[16] Therefore, an utterance can be perceived as cohesive if it is seen as consisting of elements that are part of the same collection of elements as the elements presented in

prior utterances. Category collection, as this phenomenon has been called, can be seen as using given information as a resource in the construction of an utterance, in that category collection (as a technique) requires that at least one element of the collection be recoverable from prior discourse. Consider the following:

Example 3

1. A: That speech class doesn't look too bad
2. B: Ya but statistics is gonna be a bear

Both the element "speech class" and the element "statistics" can be seen as members of the collection "university classes." Through the procedure of category collection, B can be seen as providing sufficient resources for A to see utterance 2 as cohesive with utterance 1.

3.0 Conversational Topics and the Given-New Distinction It is clear that conversations can be seen to be about something. It is also clear that even in the most formal of situations the topic, or the what-is-being-talked-about can change.

3.1 An investigation aimed at explaining the process by which the topic evolves and changes must focus on how interactants use the materials of discourse to build the conversation. A structuralist perspective provides such a focus. Whereas, from an interactant's perspective the concept of topic could be seen as being synonymous with content (that is, topic could be seen as "what we are talking about"), a structuralist perspective focuses on and provides for a description of the procedures evidenced in the cohesive relationship between utterances. It is this evidence that enables an interactant to interpret specifically what is being talked about. From a struc-

turalist's perspective the topic of conversation is a relationship between two or more utterances. A cohesive relationship between utterances can be built in at least two ways: 1) when two succeeding utterances have the same given element, and 2) when the second utterance has as its given, information that had the status of new in prior discourse. The emphasis on the relationship between utterances allows the analyst to focus on the procedures by which the relationship is constructed, and how these procedures are evidenced in the discourse.

3.2 The given-new distinction is a useful tool in the investigation of the procedures evidenced in creating topic relationships within conversations. Certain procedures (such as element repetition, category collection and pro-term insertion) can be seen on the very surface as building upon (using as a resource) prior utterances.[17] The given-new distinction provides a method for investigating these cohesive relations, and furthermore, the status of given elements and new elements is marked by the speaker for easy identification.

3.3 Studies have outlined at least some of the procedures by which interactants build topic relationships, and everyday conversational interactants appear to systematically apply these techniques with regard for some notion of the limits of their use. Consider this description of an interactant's use of topic relationship procedures resulting in topic shifts:

> . . . the topic shift tactic seems to involve three steps which require two turns by the interactant using the tactic. First, the interactant performs an utterance which is topically relevant to previous utterances, and which fulfills any turn obligations. Second, the person introduces into that same utterance the new feature which is later to become the topic of conversation. Third

> the person selects (through element repetition, category collection or insertion of the proper pro-term) in a later utterance that new feature, and makes it the topic of conversation.[18]

The point to notice here is the requirement of two turns on the part of the interactant using the tactic. The two-turn requirement seems to be responsive to an appreciation for the limitations of the procedures for producing a topic shift relationship. That is, spreading the topic shift tactic over two turns, rather than executing the shift in one turn, seems to be based on a limitation of the ability of the tactic to maintain cohesion and construct a topic shift relationship. The limitations appear to revolve around those elements which can be brought into a topic relationship without sacrificing cohesion. The topic shift tactic, as described above, suggests that interactants apply the procedures to <u>given</u> information rather than <u>new</u> information. That is, in the construction of an utterance an interactant has available as a resource for creating a topic shift relationship, information which can be marked as <u>given</u> in the utterance under construction. The interactant, in formulating the first of the two turns, supplies information which the listener integrates into the prior discourse thereby rendering that information as a potential <u>given</u> in a subsequent utterance. The status of <u>given</u>, however, appears to be contingent upon its non-rejection by the other interactants, and thus the requirement of the second turn. The logic of non-rejection here is similar to the logic used by Sacks and Schegloff in the formulation of non-recognition with regard to the try-marker ( see section 2.2). Further, the embedding of information in an utterance for the use in subsequent utterances can be seen as a subtle use of the try-marker. The use is subtle in the sense that the try-marker is not

explicitly formulated as a request regarding the state of the known in common information (e.g. "You know Steve?").

3.4 Consider the following example:

Example 4

1. A: He had pulled up a number of n n really kinda well tempered b'he pulled out a number of ah of clippings and he had ah put together statements that Nixon had made on the election eve when it was apparent he'd won an he went into this big rap about ah I want for the nation to remember how this administration conducts itself, that ah that things like nobility, honor and ethics are not out of date values
2. B: ha ha ha
3. C: When did he
4. A: When they look back on this administration they will say very genuinely ladies and gentlemen, God bless America, cut, Moyers goes into that Watergate thing.
5. D: ha ha ha
6. E: God
7. D: oooh yes
8. A: Just beautiful
9. C: Was that his acceptance speech
10. A: Was part of his acceptance speech
11. C: Did he also, ah I I was just reading uh I bin reading this Evans Novak ah book about the Nixon presidency in the first term, n about the fantastic tactical blunder they did in allowing him to give ah his conciliatory ah acceptance speech

where the whole theme was built around the bring us together theme, ya know, and how

12. B: Sixty-eight, right?

13. C: ya and that ah what happened was . . .

In this example, utterance 9 can be seen as a subtle try-marker confirming the known in commonness of the fact that utterances 1 and 4 are from Nixon's 1972 acceptance speech. Utterance 9 has the added effect of introducing the notion of "acceptance speech" into the discourse and, in the absence of any rejection or non-recognition signals, creates a potential resource for the construction of later utterances (such as utterance 11). As one can see, the procedures used for creating topic relationships were used with regard to the given information in the discourse. That is, the speaker took advantage of the resources available ( the given) for constructing the topic relationship. In utterance 9 pro-term insertion is used as a substitution for the content of utterance 4; without a given antecedent the term "that" in utterance 9 could not be interpreted. Utterance 10 can be seen as a topic continuation relationship through the display of element repetition. Utterance 11 can also be seen as cohesive discourse; in utterance 11, C appears to be using the procedure of category collection (acceptance speeches) to create a topic relationship.[19]

As pointed out earlier, (see section 2.1 and 3.2) the procedures of element repetition, category collection and pro-term insertion can be seen as built upon prior discourse. The presence of procedures which are dependent upon prior discourse allows both analysts and interactants to see that conversation as cohesive. The interpretation of the conversation as co-

hesive for the interactants is evidenced by the lack of repair mechanisms (e.g. "What does that have to do with Watergate?").

3.5 In the following example, utterance 2 can be seen as failing to achieve cohesion:

Example 5

1. A: My brother says California will be sixty-five percent Mexican-American within twn years.
2. B: My sister is having a baby

In the initial position of discourse (the first utterance in a conversation), and in the absence of any intonational cues, "California" can be seen as the topic of utterance 1.[20] Seeing California as the topic of the utterance, there is no apparent connection the listner can make between the two utterances. The listener, implementing the given-new strategy, would locate the information in the utterance marked as given, and the information marked as new, and then integrate the new information into the structure of the given information. In an initial position of discourse, the listener could not search prior discourse for the antecedent of the given information, and would have to rely on the situation or what is assumed to be known in common among the interactants. According to the given-new strategy in utterance 1 the listener (B) could reasonably be expected to see "California" as the topic, based on the construction of the utterance; find the concept of California within the information known in common; and add the information "will be . . ." to the concept of California. At this point in the conversation, the resources for creating a topic relationship seem to consists of "California" and "will be sixty-five percent Mexican-American within ten years." Utterance 2 ("My sister is having a baby") cannot easily be

seen as taking advantage of the available resources for topic relationship construction. The following example, using the available resources for creating topic relationships, can be seen as cohesive discourse:

Example 6

1. A: My brother says California will be sixty-five percent Mexican-American within ten years
2. B: Ya, I heard Arizona was going that way too.

Example 7

1. A: My brother says California will be sixty-five percent Mexican-American within ten years
2. B: They've also got a sizable Chinese-American population.

Example 6 can be seen as cohesive through the procedure of category collection (California and Arizona can be collected under the heading of states in the United States), and example 7 can be seen as an example of pro-term insertion (They is substituted for California). In contrast, utterance 2 in example 5 ("My sister is having a baby") cannot be brought into a cohesive topic relationship with the available resources ("California" and "will be . . .) unless the situation provides for a special relationship between "My sister is having a baby" and"California" or "will be sixty-five percent ... ." (e.g. My sister is Mexican-American).

3.6 In comparing examples 5 and 6, one can see that both seem to make use of the category collection procedure in utterance 2. The critical factor in the accomplishment of cohesion in example 6 and the failure to accomplish cohesion in example 5 appears to be the status of the prior discourse element which is operated upon. In example 5, "My sister" appears to

be from the same collection of categories as "My brother." However, while the element "My brother" in utterance 1 can be seen as known in common information, it does not appear to be important to what the utterance is about. In other words, it does not appear to be central to the topic of the utterance. On the other hand, in example 6, Arizona and California are seen as being from the same collection of categories, and the element California has the status of given in utterance 1 and furthermore is seen as being important to the understanding of the utterance.

Elements of utterances can, therefore, be seen to have at least four different statuses. Elements can be either given or new, a between utterances relationship, and they can be either central or peripheral, a within utterance relationship. The matrix suggested by these distinctions provides for elements which are: given and central, given and peripheral, new and central, or new and peripheral. The status of central or peripheral is determined by an element's relevance to what is being talked about within an utterance. As with utterances in the initial position of discourse, the within utterance interpretation of topic and the information applied to that topic relies on markers such as intonational cues and utterance construction.[21] This distinction of an elements status as central or peripheral is in addition to the between utterance topicality for which the given-new distinction provides, and further refines the notion of topic resources for constructing cohesive discourse.

3.7 The use of the given-new/central-peripheral distinction as an analytical tool enables the analyst to concentrate on what appears to be a systematic occurrence in conversation, and to formulate that occurrence

as a basic principle of conversation. The topic resources principle states that conversational interactants use elements which have the status of given and central as resources for the creation of topic relationships and the accomplishment of cohesion between the utterances that make up a conversation. The given-central elements provide sufficient resources for the creation of topic relationships, while the use of peripheral elements as resources for the creation of topic relationships seems to occasion special attention, such as providing or searching for additional information or justification (e.g. "your mention of your brother made me think, did you know my sister is having a baby?").[22]

It is not being suggested here that interactants consciously avoid using peripheral elements for the construction of their topic relationships. The notion of "principle" as it is being used here is one of description, as opposed to the notion of rule or convention which is more prescriptive. What is being said here is that peripheral elements do not appear to provide sufficient resources for the construction of topic relationships.

4.0 Sufficient Resources for Topic Relationships The given-new/central-peripheral distinction regarding the status of elements in an utterance provides an analytical tool for structural analysis of the process of, and the basic constraints upon, the creation of topic relationships in cohesive discourse. From a structuralist perspective the notion of topic can be seen as a relationship between utterances. The exact nature of the topic, of course, depends on the relationship between the actual elements and the implicated elements of the current utterance, and the body of prior discourse. The focus of this analysis has been on the process of creating relationships

between elements in the discourse, and on the status of the elements producing such cohesive relationships in conversation.

Traditionally, linguistic studies have attempted to designate elements in utterances as either given or new. However, for an analysis of the process of building topic relationships, additional distinctions are necessary to account for the elements in an utterance which are systematically not being used as resources for the creation of topic relationships. Peripheral elements are seen as not being relevant or important to what the utterance is about, and therefore, are seen as having the character of being insufficient resources for the creation of topic relationships. It is not usually the case that peripheral elements are used in topic relationships, and when they are used, they seem to require supplementary resources to enable the listener to determine what the utterance is about.

The exact nature of the supplementary resources has not been described. However, it seems clear that among possible supplementary resources one could include such things as the situation (specifically the formality or informality of the situation), paralinguistic cues, and justificatory statements or accounts.

A second concern left unexamined in this analysis is the durability of the status of given. That is, how long is an element available as a resource for building topic relationships, and are there any requirements that are occasioned by the use of the situation and known in common information as resources?[23] While grammatical rules can offer some insight into the use of such tactics as pro-term insertion, a more complete statement about the durability of the status of given should be the focus of a separate study.

The key factor in the creation and maintenance of cohesion in conversation seems to be the providing of sufficient resources by the sepaker so that the listener can determine the given elements in the utterance, determine the antecedents of the given elements, and relate the new information to the antecedent. Cohesion in everyday discourse could be said to be the state where interactants see themselves and others in a conversation as providing sufficient resources for the interpretation of their utterances and of the relationship of their utterances to what is being talked about, even when what is being talked about changes.

## Notes

[1]Samuel Vuchinich, "Elements of Cohesion Between Turns in Ordinary Conversation," Semiotica, 20 (1977), 229-257; M.A.K. Halliday and R. Hasan, Cohesion in English, (London: Longman, 1977).

[2]Halliday and Hasan

[3]Ibid.

[4]Vuchinich, p. 233

[5]A newspaper article in the Lewiston Morning Tribune (August 9, 1979, p. 2A) is testament to the remarkability of non-cohesive discourse. "His conversations are very disjointed . . . I've never had a conversation with Manson that didn't turn into gobbledegook. He's a strange individual in that regard."

[6]Herbert Clark and Susan Haviland, "Comprehension and the Given-New Contract," in Discourse Production and Comprehension, ed. Roy O. Freedle (Norwood: Ablex Publishing Corp., 1977).

[7]Halliday and Hasan

[8]See for example, Gail Jefferson, "Side Sequences," in Studies in Social Interaction, ed. David Sudnow (New York: Free Press, 1972)

[9]Harvey Sacks, "On the Analyzability of Stories by Children," in Direction in Sociolinguistics, ed. Gumperz and Hymes (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972).

[10]Clark and Haviland, p.5.

[11]Speaker's marking of given and new information is discussed in section 2.1 of this paper.

[12]For pro-term insertion and category collection, see Robert E. Nofsinger and William E. Boyd, "Conversational Procedures: Constructing Topic Relationships in Everyday Conversation." Unpublished manuscript, Pullman, Washington 1979. "Conversational Procedures" is a revised version of Nofsinger and Boyd, "Topic Management Procedures: Executing Tactics and Displaying Adherence to Convention," Paper presented at the 49th Annual Meeting of the Western Speech Communication Association, Los Angeles, Ca., 1979. For stress, see M.A.K. Halliday, "Notes on transitivity and theme in English," Journal of Linguistics 3 (1967), 177-274. For temporal order, see A.W. Degroot, "Subject-Predicate Analysis," Lingua, 6, (1957). While temporal order (given preceeds new) has

been formulated as a method for marking the distinction it appears to be used only in the absence of other cues or markings (See Hornby, 1972). For utterance construction see, Peter Hornby, "The Psychological Subject and Predicate," Cognitive Psychology, 3, (1972).

[13]Nofsinger and Boyd

[14]Limits on the notion of recoverability are discussed in section 4,0.

[15]Harvey Sacks and Emanuel Schegloff, "Two Preferences in the Organization of Reference to Persons in Conversation and Their Interaction," in Ethnomethodology, Labeling Theory and Deviant Behavior ed. N.H. Avison and R.J. Wilson, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974).

[16]Nofsinger and Boyd cite Sacks in their discussion of category collection and base their discussion on his presentation of the MCD.

[17]Nofsinger and Boyd

[18]Ibid. p.19.

[19]The procedure discussed appears to be category collection instead of element repetition because while C does include the element of "acceptance speeches" the acceptance speech presented in the second utterance is a different acceptance speech than the one refered to in the previous utterance.

[20]The initial position in discourse precludes prior discourse as a resource for constructing topic relationships. With normal stress patterns, the interpretation of the given-new falls to utterance construction. Temporal order isn't considered a likely form of marking (see footnote 12). Hornby, (1972) discussed seven types of utterances based on construction, and the implication the construction has for determining what the utterance is seen to be about.

[21]See Hornby; Degroot; and Halliday.

[22]A very informal situation may not occasion strict adherence to cohesion requirements and therefore may not require any justificatory accounts for the lack of cohesion.

[23]W. Chafe, "Givenness, Contrastiveness, Definiteness, Subjects, Topics and Point of View," in Subject and Topic ed. Charles Li (New York: Academic Press, 1976).